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A DESCRIPTIVE ACCOUNT of the FORT of
ARDNORCHER or HORSELEAP, near KILBEGGAN,
in the County of WESTMEATH, IRELAND; with Con-
jectures concerning its Use, and the Time of its Erection. By
Mr. JOHN BROWN RIGG. In a Letter to JOSEPH
C. WALKER, Esq; Secretary to the Committee of Antiquities.

SIR,

AS you were so kind as to approve of my antiquarian attempts, Read Dec.
I am induced to send you the following observations on the fort 6, 1788.
of Horseleap, with a view and plan of the fort.

THE very ancient fort of Ardnorcher has been for some cen-
turies past vulgarly called the fort of Horseleap, on account of
a most extraordinary leap which is said to have been formerly
made into it over the drawbridge, by an English knight in escaping
from a close pursuit.

SIR

SIR Hugh De Lacy is generally reputed to have been the founder, if not finisher of this curious fortification ; but I apprehend this to be an hasty and ill-founded opinion, like many other errors in our history, occasioned by the British writers being ignorant of the language and customs of Ireland ; for the bare view of the fort is sufficient to shew any man of observation that it is an original work of the ancient Irish, and of very great antiquity, even long before the time of De Lacy.

THE forts of Granard in the county of Longford, and of Dandonald in the county of Down, where the English pale did not extend for three centuries after De Lacy's time, might with as much reason be attributed to him, since they are exactly of the same kind and much larger than that of Ardnorcher. Its very name, indeed, is sufficient to shew that De Lacy was not the first founder of it, for it is highly improbable that he, who was of a Norman family and whose language was a mixture of French and Saxon, should give a name of pure old Irish, such as the word Ardnorchor* is, to a fortress erected in Ireland for a British garrison. In this and the like instances, the Irish language is of signal use to distinguish the works of the ancient Celtæ from those of the modern British nations in Ireland ; but the old English inhabitants of Meath having no authentic records, attribute every work of great labour or antiquity to Sir Hugh De Lacy, as the illiterate modern Irish do to Fin Mac Cumhal.

WHEN Sir Hugh De Lacy was made governor of Meath by Henry the Second, he took every precaution to secure the new

* Ardnorcher or Ard-an-orchor, literally *the fort of slaughter.*

possessions

possessions for the English crown, by erecting strong forts and castles throughout the country, and establishing therein valiant knights, with colonies of Norman and Anglo-Saxon soldiery, and by bestowing on them extensive tracts of country which they were to defend for themselves by their own personal courage and prowess against the ancient Irish proprietors. He took advantage of every circumstance and situation, whether sacred or prophane, that assisted his purpose; turning abbies into fortified castles, and their terrasses, walks and groves into trenches and bulwarks; some also of ancient Celtic, Irish and Danish forts or mounds, he repaired and strengthened by additional works of lime and stone, to check the violent and sudden efforts of the natives, who unaccustomed to slow sieges or blockades, were used to attack and carry the earthen forts of their country by assault, firing the pallisadoes and storming the trenches with furious, rapid and active courage. * It is probable that when the English extended themselves over the greatest part of Meath, the dispossessed in-

* In the reign of Henry the eighth Meath was divided into two counties. The preamble to the act of parliament, nearly four hundred years after De Lacy's time, clearly demonstrating the truth of the conjecture, that the western parts were not entirely in the hands of the English.

34 Hen. viii. chap. I. An act for the division of *Methe* into two shires.

“ For as much as the shire of Metho is grete and large in circuit, and the west part thereof laid about and beset with diverse of the King’s rebels, and that in several parts thereof the King’s writs, for lack of ministracion of justice, have not of late been obeyed,” &c.

habitants retired towards the Shannon, and strengthening themselves in great numbers in that rough part of the country, which is known at this day by the name of The Woods, and is still much encumbered with bogs, steep hills, rocks, streams and shrubby ground. Here the natives made stand, and headed by the chiefs of the country, principally the Macgeoghegans and O'Malones, began to repel the invaders, and for several centuries maintained their independency under their ancient laws. This obliged the English to fortify their frontiers with long trenches, forts and castles ; and although we have no authentic records of the conflicts that ensued between the British and Irish in this part of the country, yet the military works that remain here sufficiently shew the efforts of one party to regain, and of the other to defend, that large portion of Meath that was within the English pale. The ancient doon or moat of Ardnorcher seems to have presented itself to De Lacy as a strong link in his chain of forts and castles, which were drawn along that country from the great bogs in the southern parts of Meath towards the borders of Brehny or Brefny O'Reilly, to cover the new settlers and check the inroads of the Irish. I think he found it, like all others of the curious ancient moats (as they are called in Ireland) an high truncated cone, though not quite circular or insulated, as it is part of a long and narrow ridge. It is surrounded with a trench and an outer mound of earth, having very rude caves down through its centre, which were open lately, and may be examined at any time by the curious, their entrance being known to every one in the neighbourhood. It is defended on the north by a long morass, through which a rivulet passes to the outer mound
of

of the fort, where another stream falls into it, running from the west close by the foot of the ridge, of which Ardnorcher is a part as above-mentioned. On the east it is strengthened by a deep valley in which the united streams run close by the works ; and on the south by a sudden deep valley that separates it from the high grounds. It was weakest on the western side, because the ridge on which it stands continues to rise and run on westward from the fort ; but De Lacy's military knowledge taught him to improve this situation so as to render it a most formidable and almost impenetrable fortress before the use of fire arms. He cut the ridge across with two intrenchments at a small distance from each other; these are not very large, but he seems to have raised and strengthened the outer mounds of the old fort, and to have made the trench deeper. On the western part of the high mount are the remains of a small round tower built of lime and stone, which I suppose was high enough to overlook and command the ridge ; and a stone wall, whose fragments are still visible, surrounded the remainder of the platform of this high mount, and not only overlooked the lower works of the fort, but commanded the circumjacent country. The next lower area on the south-east side, was defended by a sweeping wall, in which was the great gate into the body of the place, accessible only by a draw-bridge over a very deep valley or fossé supported by two piers of stone work, one communicating with the gate of the fort, and the other joined to the high land on the south side of the fossé, the wall continuing round the east side of the fort till it closed with the high mount in the north-east point, where I apprehend the communication between the higher and lower

areas to have been. All the walls that surrounded these works are demolished and tumbled over into the lower area, where they lie scattered in large fragments; but they have left in some spots visible traces of their foundations, and also of the foundations of some partition walls on the upper fort, and of some square buildings on the next lower area near the great gate, as is marked on the plan. The only stone work that has escaped the ravages of war and time are the two piers of the draw-bridge and lower gate, now vulgarly called the *Horseleap*; these were not only piers of the draw-bridge into the fort, but served also as sides to a gateway which shut up the lowest area or deep fossé of the fort, wherein I conceive that in time of danger they kept their cattle and fuel, and every other store which required room. This hollow place is very deep and well sheltered; and, notwithstanding two rivulets ran along two sides of the fort, a well was dug in it at B, to supply the garrison and their cattle with water during a blockade, and which I suppose was deep enough to draw water thereto from the river by a subterraneous drain. I have no doubt that there were other works both of earth and stone belonging to this fort, which are now so decayed and defaced as not to be distinctly observed.

THERE was a wall of lime and stone on the summit or spine of the hill or ridge, the foundation of which can be traced all the way from the fort to the road at A, where, in the ditches on each side of it, the lime and stone are still visible. The use of this wall I cannot conceive, except it was carried quite round the hill upon which the church stands, to circumscribe a

town,

town, and to guard the ancient road from the borders into the pale which crosses the church hill, as on this same ridge of ground, better than a mile distance westward, stands the strong castle of Larah, close to another high road from The Woods, which it shut up and commanded, preventing any possibility of a body of men coming into the pale from this quarter. But this castle I take to be a later work, and an advancement of the borders of the pale; and I believe the word Larah signifies the border.

HAVING ventured to mention the fort of Ardnorcher as one of the frontier forts of the pale, I shall here offer my reasons for that assertion: And first, I will observe, that many of the Irish families beyond this point remained in possession of their lands for several centuries after Hugh De Lacy's time, and some of them continue in possession to this hour; but that not one Irish family have any landed property within it; and that besides, in Abbé Mac Geoghegan's map of Ireland, the delineation of the English pale will be found to run near this direction.

THE river that comes from the northward to Ardnorcher I suppose to have been the boundary of the pale, because at the ford on this river, at the green of Donore Geoghegan, where another road enters the pale from The Woods, there is a strong fort on the English side of the river, commanding the ford and the road, and rendering the passage this way an enterprize of danger; and because that, from this point northward, as far as my eye could reach, I traced through a low swampy bottom a

wide

wide entrenchment, which I am assured may be followed many miles further in the same direction, and which the neighbouring peasants said, in answer to my enquiries concerning the use of it, had been cut by Sir Hugh De Lacy, as he intended to draw the waters of Lough Ennel to Horseleap, a tradition which is much to my purpose, though a little tinged with modern ignorance; for certainly the trench commencing under a fort, and carried on for miles through a very rough hilly country, was not intended for a water course, but a boundary.

I am,

S I R,

Your most obedient servant,

J. B R O W N R I G G.

DUBLIN, Grafton-street,
16th February, 1788.